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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Reese, N. (2010). "Still working on it": an overview on the current state of public activism of women in the Philippines. *ASEAS - Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 3(2), 136-150. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-361226>

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“Still Working on it”: An Overview on the Current State of Public Activism of Women in the Philippines

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Citation Reese, N. (2010). “Still Working on it”: An Overview on the Current State of Public Activism of Women in the Philippines. *ASEAS - Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 3(2), 136-150.

This paper gives an overview on to what extent public activism in the Philippines is still gendered and how far it, therefore, disadvantages women. The paper consists of three major topics: (1) observations on women and the public space, (2) an outline of women and formal politics, and (3) a glimpse into gender within civil society and social movements in the Philippines.

Keywords: *Civil Society, Gender Roles, Women’s Movement, Public Space, Philippines*

Dieser Artikel behandelt die Frage, inwiefern Aktivismus von Frauen im öffentlichen Raum in den Philippinen noch immer geschlechtsspezifisch definiert ist und ob Frauen dadurch benachteiligt werden. Der Artikel ist in drei Abschnitte gegliedert: (1) Beobachtungen zu Frauen und öffentlichem Raum, (2) Überblick über die Rolle der Frauen in der formellen Politik und (3) eine Annäherung an geschlechtsspezifische Fragestellungen in Zivilgesellschaft und sozialen Bewegungen in den Philippinen.

Schlagworte: *Zivilgesellschaft, Geschlechterrollen, Frauenbewegung, Öffentlicher Raum, Philippinen*



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Introduction

The *Filipin@s*² are known for their vivid civil society and their massive street protests (named ‘EDSA-revolutions’, after the main traversal in the capital Metro Manila), which have led to the downfall of now two presidents, Marcos in 1986 and Estrada in

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2 *Filipin@s* is a gender-sensitive term, which includes Filipinos as well as Filipinas. It is copied from a social movement practice in Latin America.

2001. Women have up to now taken a significant role in prominent social movements. Furthermore, according to a World Economic Forum survey ("RP among the best", 2009), the Philippines is rated number 9 in the world in terms of promoting equality among the sexes. Does this imply that the public sphere is no longer male territory as the traditional patriarchal setup considers it to be?

This paper has an exploratory character, seeking to identify to what extent reality and discourse on public activism and citizenship in the Philippines are (still) gendered and how far they disadvantage women.³ Though there is some first-hand research included (Reese, 2009), the claim of this paper is modest: it attempts to provide a general overview on the state of gender and politics in the Philippines and to associate different arenas of gender politics – from the private to everyday resistance and outer-parliamentarian political activism to formal politics. Thereby, I suggest that all these different spheres are ruled by a similar paradigm.

The results presented here have been written to provide women's rights activists in the Philippines and elsewhere with a kind of 'state description' rather than contribute to an academic discourse (especially as the theoretical integration of the article had to be withdrawn due to space constraints). Therefore, it would be far too ambitious if this paper were to be understood as a conclusive state description of gender and politics in the Philippines. Because of this, the research focused on observing and participating in the public discourse and everyday life in the Philippines. Bases for the paper have been (1) a re-reading of academic and everyday literature on democratisation and gender in the Philippines, (2) participant observation and in-depth interviews during various field trips to the Philippines since 1998, and finally, (3) 14 interviews and group discussions with several women (and a few men) involved in social movements and political work in the Philippines, conducted in 2009 and 2010.

Private Women and Public Men? Gender Regime in the Philippines

The Philippines seems to be very progressive in regard to gender equality and female presence in politics. That is why there are claims made, especially by men, that

³ The notion of citizenship I want to draw on expresses itself in (a) political agency and (b) a sense of entitlement to social and public services. So it is not necessarily linked to a sense of nationalism and a clear identification with one nation state, still common despite a growing literature on transnational and post-national citizenship.

patriarchy is only a kind of icing with women pulling the strings in the background. It happens that Filipino men portray themselves as *takusa* (short for *takot sa asawa*, meaning ‘scared of the wife’). In this spirit, Castillo and Guerrero described in 1969 the Philippines to be “a male-dominated society (in the public eye) managed by females (in private)” (Castillo & Guerrero in Medina, 2001, p. 156). But this suggestion lacks empirical evidence. It seems to be much more appropriate to describe the Philippines as a society “that revolves around male privilege on one hand and female acquiescence on the other” (Tan, 2003; also cf. Reese, 2006).

The normative ideal that wives should stay home and care for the family is still very prevalent. Nevertheless, many women have joined the labour force.⁴ The feminisation of migration may be the most visible way of seeing how women have crossed the border from private to public space, the latter being traditionally considered male territory, especially if one considers that migration not only leads to the overcoming of poverty but also is a way of “getting to know the world and linking with it” (Martínez, 2001, p. 41). The feminisation of migration has also resulted in more and more women being the main breadwinners of their families, which contradicts the still in-force patriarchal model of the “male as breadwinner” and forces men to “remake their masculinities” (Pingol, 2001).

Glass ceilings though are still prevalent in the Philippines. This is the same as in other countries where the higher the position, the fewer women can be found. And what speaks even more against the myth of gender equality in Philippine society is that there has only been little rupture of the gender-specific division of labour. While one can witness the entry of women into the public sphere, there is only little entry of men into the private sphere, as this is still widely considered to be a female domain. Working women receive only minimal acknowledgment and understanding, even though they may also prove themselves as good family guardians. Shattered family relations and ‘problem kids’ are solely blamed on mothers and wives (Parreñas, 2002). Women often call their employment ‘helping out’, sometimes even if they are the main breadwinners in monetary terms (cf. Paguntalan, 2002, p. 174). They consider this to be an “extension of her wife and mother role which demands that she contributes her share for the economic survival of the family” (Medina, 2001, p.

4 Some occupations, though, are still nearly completely male-dominated. You would still hardly see any female drivers or construction workers in the Philippines.

201). Being a good mother, a good wife, and a good caretaker are still the primary responsibilities of a Filipina and, for most of them, their main identity as well: to be a 'whole women' to most of them means to be married and have children (Doyo, 1998). Because of the resulting double burden, lack of time is the most important everyday life restriction of working mothers.⁵ The entry into the public space reflected in the higher ratio of female employment is not necessarily a sign of higher acceptance of women in the public (rights driven), but may rather be especially for lower class women out of economic necessity (needs driven).

Traditionally, patriarchy also manifested itself in the public space reserved for men. Women had no business being there if not for their specific female business: *bata*, *bahay*, *baboy*, and *bana* (children, house, 'pig' for supplementary income, and husband). They should not be seen in pubs or seen smoking and drinking in public in order not to be mistaken for a *mujer publica*, as prostitutes were called in Spanish times, and considered *walang hiya* (without decency).⁶

But then again, there have always interesting 'traces of women power' within patriarchy. Many Filipinas may behave *mahinhin* (decent) towards strangers and in public, but according to my observations they indeed display a high zest for action, entrepreneurship, assertiveness, and firmness in spaces perceived as 'private'. Managing the household and family affairs and caring for a responsible spending of the scarce resources (romanticised as 'power of the purse') alone expresses a high incidence of female agency.⁷ At the same time, this is not yet proof of the incidence of female *political* agency.

Of course, times have changed: The Philippines has had two female presidents in only two decades and there are more women governors, congresswomen, mayors, and local councillors in the Philippines than elsewhere in Asia. The Philippines was in

5 The women union leader I interviewed (Reese, 2009) was even president of a male-dominated union for more than ten years. Making her president was a strategic move by the union, as the factory owner hired goons but would not have deployed them against a women leader. She was considered brave, but another major reason was that she was single at that time. She had no double burden, could attend to a 'male timetable' and would not have left a family behind in case the goons killed her.

6 The dualism of either 'Madonna' or 'whore' is again simplified. There have been other roles, such as the healer (*babaylanes* or *mananambal*) or the lesbian, that women could take on allowing them to deviate from traditional notions of femaleness. But the dichotomy of Maria Clara (the prototype of a decent woman) or 'the other Mary' seem to be the dominant field of tension within which most women up to now have to develop their own womanhood (Ellwood-Clayton, 2006).

7 Considering that 'citizenship' is not only attributed to rights but to duties and responsibilities as well (communitarian and republican tradition), the high sense of responsibility of women for their "loved ones" (Tan, 2003) can be seen as another expression and base of women's citizenship and agency.

1995 one of the first countries worldwide to adopt a policy providing for gender and development (GAD) in its national budget through the Women in Development and Nation Building Act, which requires all government agencies to set aside five percent of their budgets for gender and development activities. Another much cited law is the 'Anti-Violence Against Women and Their Children Act' of 2004. And several cities in the Philippines have followed Davao City in passing its 'Women Development Code of 1997'. Finally, media projects non-traditional women's roles and gender relations into nearly every household, which makes alternative self-concepts for women imaginable.

Given these circumstances, did an agency of women in public develop during the last decades? To find this out, I first had a look at the micro-politics of everyday gender relations, assuming this to be a significant indicator for the broadening of the political agency of women in general as without a change in the life-world setup, an empowerment of women in 'formal politics' will hardly be sustainable. (Herewith, I also followed the approach of Foucault and Gramsci, who consider social institutions such as the family and practices such as sexuality the places where subjects are 'educated' and 'governed' to do what is 'desirable'.) During my field research in 2009 and 2010, I encountered five areas of everyday gender relations that seem significant to give an answer to the question of female agency: (1) the distribution of household chores and child raising, (2) the presence of women in public, especially for leisure purposes, and the way they are expected to dress in public, (3) courtship rules, (4) decisions regarding contraception, birth control and sex frequency (women asserting the right to their own body), and, finally, (5) 'daring' to end an abusive or even a disenchanting relationship or marriage.

In all five areas, it can be said that changes have occurred, although they seem to be minuscule especially in regard to contraception decisions: Still 80 percent of Filipino men have never used a condom, and 58 percent have never used any other contraceptive (Health Management and Research Group Foundation [HMRG] Inc., 2009, p. 39).⁸ Likewise, the redistribution of household chores and child raising only happens at a snail's pace, mainly where women become the main breadwinner, no

8 Even a lot of women think that "condom use interferes with the future-orientated view of a sexual partner, with condoms signifying a lack of fidelity and intruding into intimate settings as decidedly unromantic" (Ellwood-Clayton, 2006, p. 15). She comes to the conclusion that "negotiating safe sex is culturally incongruous to Maria Clara norms of femininity [which] means that women defer to boyfriends, and later to husbands, in their sexual decision-making" (Ellwood-Clayton, 2006, p. 23).

other woman is at hand to take over, and husbands agree to take care of the children and, to a lesser extent, of the household. Again, women have come to terms with this reversal of roles (Pingol, 2001; surveys by the author in 2009).⁹

Courtship rules and the access of women to leisure space may have changed most (reflecting amongst other things the generational causation of changing gender relations), although this again is more strongly pronounced in an urban setting. Frowning upon women going out at night (often without a male companion but nearly always with female companions) has decreased, as long as 'she' is not yet married. (It seems that the expectation that women 'stay at home' as soon as they are married is still predominant.) Only young women, for example, can be seen wearing spaghetti straps. And (urban) women are no longer required to play *pakipot* (hard to get) once a male courts her. At times, she actually has to show assertiveness for courting to proceed. However, to make the first move when attracted by a man would only be dared by a very few women, even if they no longer submitted to the underlying gender ideology and perceived it as symbolic violence. "The Filipino men are not ready for that and most would consider you to be cheap girl and desperately seeking ... We cannot afford to be commented on like that; it would be shameful", as respondents said during a focus group discussion (Reese, 2009). The patriarchal gaze seems hard to escape or to resist, just like Foucault's *panopticon*. So most women can only act to the extent of being *pahiwatig*, hinting their interest in a man by nonverbal signs or verbal goofing around ('*joke lang*' as one often says in the Philippines). Even 'Manila girls', who are seen to be the most progressive in their behaviour, consider it to be inevitable to comply with the dominant sexual conservatism (dubbed 'family values' in the Philippines) and the passivity it ascribes to women in order not to lose their respectability.

Finally, more women than ever are putting an end to abusive and violent relationships and marriages instead of staying in them. And this is despite the fact that separated wives are often treated as second-class women (Ellwood-Clayton, 2006, p. 6). While women often think "good for you" and are even somewhat envious, men consider them fair game, as they "have been used already", so they are placing

9 Several women are reluctant in handing over household chores to their partners, as they do not meet their standards in exercising them. Even more, they hesitate to entrust their children to their husbands, especially if they are still young. Activists jokingly call this behaviour 'obsessive-compulsive *disease*' (the 'D' in OCD actually stands for '*disorder*') and observe it amongst themselves as well (Reese, 2009).

themselves more at risk of experiencing unwelcome advances and harassment (personal communication, in Reese 2009).

Not only men but also women, above all the mothers-in-law (Pingol, 2001), react when women depart from traditional behaviour and enter the public space. “My [mother] in law is my number one critic”, as one female trade unionist said (Reese, 2009).

Formal Politics and Gender in the Philippines

Traditionally, women have mainly appeared in the political sphere as supporters of their male kin – their sons, brothers, or fathers, but especially their husbands. Wives are usually “partners in politics” (Roces, 1998, p. 7), running the charity work, organising community projects, and sharing the political work of their politician husbands. Roces even assumes that “an active wife or a female kin was generally necessary for the success of the male politician” (Roces, 1998, p. 30). But even if wives function as the politicians’ “number one advisor” (Gina de Venecia, the wife of ex-speaker Jose de Venecia, in Roces, 1998, p. 54), they are exercising these tasks informally and consider themselves in a role where they ‘just help out’. This supportive role still seems to be the prevalent one that women occupy today, not only in the sphere of institutional politics but within civil society as well (see below).

However, somewhat in contradiction of this, one also finds more women directly involved in (formal) politics. The terms of two women presidents have normalised the political activity of women (for more on Arroyo and Aquino, see Veneracion, 2009).¹⁰ Being formally politically active – although still the exception – has become a role for women which is tolerated by more and more men and seen as a positive role model by women. Yet, women have to be mindful not to create the impression that they are overpowering or upstaging men and putting them down or ‘polluting the minds of women’, an apprehension feminists of the first generation were considered to have triggered.¹¹ It seems that the model of women speaking up and acting in public

10 Both women came to presidency in times of crises, times in which women are called to fix – just like Germany’s Angela Merkel in 1998. “It seems that in crisis, there seems to be a natural course of action to take women to lead. There is a general sentiment that they can be trusted (*mapagkatiwalaan*)”, as Jun Naraval observes (Reese, 2009). But usually when the crisis is over, women feel the pressure from men to hand power back to them.

11 This correlates with the experience of activists when conducting gender sensitivity training. These only lead to lasting changes within gender relations when such training is conducted for men as well. Otherwise, “even if trained

has become possible, although it still leads to irritation and even negative feedback. They are still reminded "You cannot shut up and listen" (personal communication, in Reese, 2009).

Furthermore, the public commitment of women is often only feasible because of the "yaya sisterhood", as Coronel (2005) calls the division of labour between "madam and maid" (Young, 1999). Where women lack the time to shoulder the double load of family and job, rarely men and husbands step into the breach (even if they are underemployed or unemployed). Better-off households employ women from the lower classes as domestic workers or nannies (*yaya*); in poor households, usually other female relatives fulfil this role. This is true for 'emancipated households' as well, although one can find a few cases of househusbands in this context.¹²

As mentioned before, many women are involved in politics, but have been mainly elected or appointed into these positions not because of (or even despite) their being women but because of kinship ties (next to being famous actresses or beauty queens). Most of them come from powerful families, and many of them took over a post from a male relative who can no longer run due to term restrictions. This is one expression of how families rule political affairs (a feudal trait of politics) not individuals. Wives and female kin get identified with the incumbent male (partly as they acted as supporters before), so that they appear to be their alter ego and natural successors in office. This also implies that they have to pursue the interests of their clan first and are less geared towards a pro-women agenda dissolving patriarchal structures, putting an end to the socio-economic and cultural discrimination of women, or bringing more women into the corridors of power.

Women who leave their role of a 'supporter' within the framework of informal politics 'behind the scenes' and enter the 'open transcript' (Scott, 1990) of the public arena then usually make use of female scripts. They act the role of mothers, be it as caretakers, as guardians of morality, or as martyrs for the greater good. While the 'hard issues' and influential committees are still taken care of by men, women

and enlightened, women go home and they submit to the decisions of the male", a (male) gender trainer told me, as men insist on their role as the head of the family and the women attach more importance to peace in the family than to their own equality. "It is very difficult to empower women if you leave the men behind" (Reese, 2009; cf. HMRG, 2009, for more on gender sensitivity training for men).

12 Men who take over traditional female roles or work in all-women environments all report to have gone through a time of adjusting to these unfamiliar roles, and also to get used to self-confident, outspoken, and assertive women cracking lots of 'green' jokes (Reese, 2009; on househusbands, cf. Pingol, 2001).

politicians are given the responsibility for ‘female issues’ like welfare, health, children, housing, beautification, orderliness, and cleanliness (and as a ‘logical extension of that’, environmental issues [Roces, 1998, p. 55]), thereby extending their caretaker role to the ‘national family’, although after 1986, some women were also assigned to fields like diplomacy, economics, and law.

Even women activists believe that women can be a cure for ‘dirty politics’ (inhabited by *trapos*, traditional politicians a.k.a. ‘dirty rugs’), ‘cleaning’ it through moral behaviour by being more human and nurturing and emphasising negotiations and dialogue (Reese, 2009), even if the ‘dirtiness of politics’ is an argument exploited to keep women out of politics because it could be considered to defile their purity.

Women activists and politicians often capitalise on feminine assets and make use of ‘womanly wiles’. They strategically use a soft (but persistent) tone, do not openly antagonise, and charm to get the necessary resources for their projects, or display *lambing-lambing* (*lambing*, meaning ‘to fondle’), act *cariñoso* (affectionate) to ‘convince’ their husband or a male colleague of their submissiveness. They are also assigned roles by male leadership where they are expected as women to be more successful than men (in the case of protest politics for instance, deceiving the authorities with female wiles). However, this is done in the expectation that these women can be ‘managed’ and act the way the male leaders advise.

This style of female politicking is often singled out, but it is not the only style that can be observed. The anthropologist Michael Tan (2009) has isolated different “*Pinay* [leadership] archetypes”: next to the *tita* (aunt) style, which most resembles the moral mother type and has been embodied by former president Corazon Aquino, he discovered the *ate* (strict oldest sister) archetype in former president Macapagal-Arroyo’s way of leadership. Arroyo’s (self-declared) framework was that of a “strong republic” (*matatag na republika*), which makes Veneracion (2009, p. 112) call her an “Iron Lady”, and activists consider her to be “only woman in physical but macho in action” (Reese, 2009). Arroyo has been under harsh attack for years, and this again has a gender aspect only because she acts ‘macho’, so she can be attacked and criticised like a man. Finally, Tan distinguishes the *madam* type, which he finds in Imelda Marcos, “for whom life is one big continuing performance, with the Imeldas as director, producer and leading actress” (Tan, 2009).

There might even be more than these three archetypes mentioned by Tan: The

manang (old spinster) or *amazon* type personified by senator Miriam Defensor Santiago, very vocal and critical and not only harsh but pitiless and insulting at times, a woman who can 'take on' men. Another is the *lola* type, a type which is very motherly but decisive and ruling at the same time and "whom you should not answer back" (one respondent in Reese, 2009). Still another is Grace Padaca, provincial governor of Isabela from 2004 to 2010. She may belong to a further group, the moral guardian, which is rather situated in the extra-institutional opposition and has been most significantly embodied in the nuns of the anti-Marcos dictatorship struggle (discussed in the next section).

The sense of this enumeration at this point is only to illustrate that the mother archetype is not the only one at hand for women entering formal politics. But most of the mentioned female politicians not (dominantly) performing the mother archetype perform their role within the logic on female politics as well or, like Macapagal-Arroyo at times, "reinvent" (Roces, 1998, p. 112) themselves and resort to female images to improve their chances.

Norms and Realities: Gender and the Progressive Forces

Origins of Feminism in the Philippines

Feminism as a social movement in the Philippines is a rather young and still a peripheral phenomenon. Within families, the church, the media, and the educational system, the traditional gender setup is still largely reproduced. According to my observations, 'liberated women' are usually understood as ones who are 'cheap' and 'easy to get'. "Patriarchal ideology is so strong that a counter-hegemonic movement can only hope to develop pockets of resistance, even within the progressive movement" (Raquiza, 1997, p. 181). Many women advocating feminist concerns therefore feel uneasy about being named 'feminists' and rather speak of themselves as 'woman rights activists' (cf. Roces, 2010, for parallels all over Asia).

The times of martial law altered the images of women in public and female power with two new images evolving: the militant nun and the woman warrior within the armed/national democratic (ND) anti-dictatorship struggle. While the first was formative for the public image, the latter stayed marginal (cf. Roces, 1998).

The radical nuns put their life at risk, protected men who were victimised by martial law, political prisoners, workers on strike, and indigenous people who were in danger of losing their ancestral domain (Roces, 1998, p. 123). This model became especially graphic during EDSA I, also known as the 'Rosary Revolution', when nuns 'armed' solely with rosaries confronted the military. The non-violent nuns were exercising moral power, suffering and sacrificing themselves for the greater good. But they did not claim formal power. (I know of no nun who turned politician, unlike former priests who populate the political ranks.) The parallels to the anti-dictatorship struggles in Latin America are stunning. As in the case there, one may understand the image of the militant nun as a 'politicisation of motherhood' (Kron, 2008).

Most militant nuns turn out to be very conservative in gender and reproductive matters, as I witnessed, but again, it has been nuns who acted as the ferment of feminism. A nun (Sister Mary John Mananzan) founded the first academic Woman's centre at St Scholastica College, facilitated the founding of the political Woman's networks PILIPINA and GABRIELA, and up to now has been one of the key figures of radical feminism in the Philippines. The militant nuns can be considered the cradle of feminism in the Philippines, being the first and, still to today, the most confident in labelling themselves 'feminists' (Roces, 1998, p.133). But at the same time, they refrained from claiming official/formal power.

Women in Civil Society

Feminist issues and organisations taking on a feminist agenda only acquired full priority in 1986 after the end of the anti-dictatorship struggle and its more seemingly pressing issues, as before "tensions between feminism and nationalism prevented any sophisticated theorising of feminism and its adaptation to the Philippine cultural matrix" (Roces, 1998, p. 148). Nowadays, the presence of women and women's groups in social movements, civil society, and people's organisations is manifold because of the global departure of feminism in the last decades, the growing pressure of women within progressive movements to extend the paradigm of liberation and empowerment to the sphere of gender relations, the grassroots women's quest for self-determination and, last but not least, the top-down influence of government and (international) funding agencies promoting gender issues. Can we observe that this

does not only lead to much 'gender talk' but to 'walking this talk' as well?

On the one hand, the (often dominant) participation of women in civil society goes beyond the membership in women's (rights) groups, especially extending to groups dealing with traditional women's issues like health, children or consumer issues. But men usually dominate organisations with mixed gender membership, even if most members are women. In mixed gender discussions, usually men dominate the talk, while women most of the time keep low key and only listen. They would only speak up and 'push the wall' when 'female issues' come up.¹³

In Philippine NGOs and people's organisations, above-average men are occupying symbolically prized positions such as president, while women execute the labour-intensive tasks. They are secretaries, treasurers, or bookkeepers, as well as in charge of cooking, catering, and the decoration committee. Men make decisions, while women put them into effect. Gender-sensitivity training for women – and nowadays even for men – has only been able to change this slowly.

And where women assert leadership positions in civil society organisations (CSOs), they mainly have a middle- and upper-class background, even within 'people-oriented' leftist movements, while the staff consists mainly of lower-income professionals with a middle-class and petty bourgeois background. The informal working class is largely excluded from active participation in CSOs, and if men and women from lower classes are to be found, then they act mainly as clerks, caretakers, and street workers, or simply as part of the 'warm bodies' (as the participants of mass rallies are called in the Philippines) and the grassroots of the CSOs. The number of persons with underclass origin that have made careers within civil society is very limited despite the pro-poor rhetoric that dominates civil society discourse. Women from the lower echelons of society feel treated in a disrespectful way by middle-class people, academics, and intellectuals. "Even if we do not hear them say these things [downgrading terms] we feel it ... They are smiling, but they put the alcohol [cleaning their hands]" (Women Trade Unionists, personal communication, in Reese, 2009).

Gender issues are still often considered to be 'side contradictions' in progressive circles, with men withdrawing once these are raised in discussions – just like in the times of the anti-Marcos struggle, when the objectives of feminism were perceived to

13 This is a reason why many women's rights activists do insist on 'all-women spaces', as they consider them to be an arena where women can develop assertiveness and leadership skills, which they finally can also use to 'voice out' in mixed gender settings even if this would mean entering into a conflict (Reese, 2009).

be in conflict with the aim of national liberation and social revolution, and the (male) leadership of the liberation movement gave the issues of social injustice and class struggle priority. Within the 'National Democrats', GABRIELA tried to strike a balance between socialist and feminist ends, but met widespread reservations, especially amongst the male cadre, as they were accused of being divisive. They supported the issue of violence against women, an issue that was prevalent within 'politically mobilised' households as well.

Conclusion

While there has been a massive entry of women into the public sphere (labour, politics, and leisure space), the gender superstructure has remained stable within the traditional patriarchal setup. Women in the public sphere therefore still have to be more open and forthright in their assertion to be there, even though it is still not really considered their place. Women activists experience that some officials would rather listen to men than to women when certain concerns are ventilated, and that officials at times are turned off if women just put facts on the table, not playing on the 'women's keyboard' and using the tools of informal politics.

Women's rights activists and women's citizenship rights still have a long way to go. Reproductive rights are still contested by the Catholic hierarchy, even if the reproductive health bill finds large support amongst the populace (which in Western terms is still rather conservative), with 78 percent supporting it and only nine percent opposing it (Mangahas, 2009) – or are 'still working on it', as rural women activists once responded when I asked them how they struggle free from the powerful culture of traditional gender relations. Women's presence in the public sphere is more accepted nowadays but still contested.

So, a rollback is hardly to be expected, even if the society's economic dependency on women makes their working indispensable. Sooner or later, this tension between social reality and ideological expectations may fracture and thereby weaken the patriarchal superstructure.

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